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HEADLINE: End of two eras at U-Md.: President and tuition freeze;
Working with Annapolis, university prospered in Mote's last few years

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BODY:

Four years ago, University of Maryland President C.D. Mote Jr.'s campaign to improve the state's flagship campus at College Park appeared to be threatened by a gubernatorial candidate who wanted to freeze tuition.

Some feared that the freeze, championed by Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) on the campaign trail and enacted by the state legislature, might return the state's premier research university to mediocrity. Instead, its reputation continued to rise: Freshman SAT scores and grade-point averages are higher than ever, and the university has steadily scaled the collegiate rankings.

The close of Mote's 12-year tenure as U-Md. president this summer will coincide with the end of the tuition freeze across the state university system.

O'Malley announced last month that public university tuition would rise this year for the first time since 2005, by 3 percent. Current seniors are paying the same tuition as when they were freshmen. Tuition and fees at College Park, for instance, total \$8,053 for state residents.

"The tuition freeze has done what it was supposed to do and bring the University of Maryland and the system as a

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whole back into the 50th percentile of affordable schools in the nation," said Steve Glickman, student body president.

The freeze was unique among the states and repositioned Maryland in the middle of the pack for college affordability. The state's overall rank in average tuition -- including all of its four-year public institutions -- dropped from eighth in 2005-06 to 17th in 2009-10, according to the College Board's annual report, Trends in College Pricing. Average tuition was lower in Virginia when Maryland's freeze began; now it is higher.

"I envisioned making college more affordable," O'Malley said in a recent interview. "As a state, I think it had been our tradition to think that affordable college was a tool to strengthen the ranks of the middle class."

Although neither Mote nor his boss, state university Chancellor William E. Kirwan, proposed the freeze, education leaders said the two deserve credit for managing it.

Kirwan oversaw an Effectiveness and Efficiency Initiative, which saved money across the 11-campus system through such means as increasing faculty teaching loads and steering more students to less expensive campuses. Mote brought in a mountain of new money, leading the two largest fundraising campaigns in university history, and he raised U-Md.'s annual research funding to \$500 million.

Kirwan pointed out that the legislature effectively replaced the lost tuition dollars -- about \$20 million a year -- with general-fund revenue each year during the freeze. "I've been around since 1964," he said. "I don't ever remember a time when higher education was given the sense of respect and priority that it has been in recent years."

Mote could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

In the most recent fiscal year, at the pit of the recession, state and local funding to Maryland public college students rose by 4 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars, to \$8,100 per student, according to a report by the group State Higher Education Executive Officers. Higher education spending nationwide declined by 4 percent on average.

"State legislators in Maryland made difficult decisions to keep their end of the bargain, and leaders of the university kept their end of the bargain," said Matt Hamill, senior vice president of the National Association of College and University Business Officers, who termed the level of cooperation "unprecedented."

Public support for a tuition freeze grew in the first half of the past decade, when tuition rose by 40 percent at some campuses. O'Malley proposed a freeze in a January 2006 news conference, propelling the issue of college affordability to a major campaign theme. State university regents proposed an increase later that year, but state lawmakers countered by mandating a freeze.

"We were getting reports from the regents about the number of kids who were dropping out of school because of the increases," said James C. Rosapepe (D), a former university system regent and an early supporter of the tuition freeze. He is now a state senator representing Prince George's County.

Maintaining the freeze became increasingly difficult toward the end of the decade, with the state economy in a tailspin. O'Malley fought objections from some fellow Democrats in extending it to a fourth year. This year, with the state facing a \$2 billion shortfall, he backed down.

"We're getting hammered by the worst recession we've had since the Great Depression," he said. "We have to balance our budget. We have to be fiscally responsible."

When asked whether he thought other states might follow Maryland's lead, O'Malley laughed. According to higher education leaders, freezing college tuition is the last thing on the minds of many cash-strapped state governments.

Said Hamill: "I think it may be a while before governors and legislatures do the kinds of things that Maryland did."

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GRAPHIC: IMAGE; Courtesy Of The University Of Maryland; C.D. Mote Jr. has been U-Md.'s president since 1998. He steps down this summer.

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